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CIA Pinpoints Soviet Germ Warfare Unit

In past columns I've reported on the threat posed by the Soviet Union's persistent efforts to develop new and ever-grislier biological weapons. Now I have even more frightening evidence obtained from the most secret documents.

"The intelligence evidence indicates that the Soviets have maintained an offensive biological warfare program and capability since the [1971] Biological Weapons Convention," a CIA report states.

Though the Soviets signed the resulting treaty, they have consistently violated it—and just as consistently lied about their violations.

But the CIA has penetrated the Kremlin's efforts to cover its tracks on germ warfare testing and production. CIA sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that agency experts on Soviet military organization have even identified the unit responsible for all aspects of the Soviet program.

This "covert administrative and organizational apparatus" is hidden in the Ministry of Defense and is called the "Seventh Main Directorate."

In fact, a separate division of the Microbiological Industry Organization—a supposedly civilian agency—was created by 1976 to help the directorate in its deadly work. The division, headed by a general, includes heavily guarded, military-sponsored facilities for the development and storage of small quantities of microorganisms until they are needed for rapid, large-scale production of germ-war agents.

The CIA has also identified nine locations where the Soviets carry on their program.

The two primary sites—confirmed beyond question as biological-weapons facilities—are at Sverdlovsk and Zagorsk. Sverdlovsk was the scene of a biological weapons plant accident that killed anywhere from 200 to 1,000 people in April 1979.

The Zagorsk facility masquerades as the Scientific Research Institute of Sanitation. Not far from Moscow, Zagorsk is where the germ weapons boss, Gen. V.I. Ogarkov, spends much of his time.

Both plants were completed in 1968, with new construction continuing through last year. Both are known to be under military control, and a secret National Security Council report states that "of particular interest at Sverdlovsk and Zagorsk are highly secure special storage areas which are designed for weapons assembly and storage."

Despite their obvious military significance, the situation at Sverdlovsk and Zagorsk is somewhat confused—perhaps as a deliberate cover—by the fact that portions of the two facilities are engaged in legitimate research and production connected with the medical-pharmaceutical, agricultural and food processing industries.

The urgency of the CIA's intelligence efforts directed at suspected Soviet biological-weapons facilities is explained in the secret NSC report to the president:

"Some of the compounds developed under this program may now be available in sufficient quantities to permit extensive testing for their usefulness as field agents. Sufficient quantities for initial munitions testing and weaponization could become available within the next five years."